

Momentum for compensation change

This week I have written to the Attorneys-General of the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments on behalf of the Truth Justice and Healing Council (TJHC) asking them to consider a national compensation scheme for the victims of child sexual abuse.

The proposal for a national scheme was outlined in our September submission to the Royal Commission on *Towards Healing*.

Last week, the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations released its report, *Betrayal of Trust*.

Significantly, the Victorian Inquiry has recommended the State Government examine setting up a specific compensation scheme for victims of child sex abuse, funded by institutions.

This is an important initiative that is supported by Church leaders in Victoria.

A few days before the release of the Victorian report, Royal Commissioner Justice McClellan flagged his interest in examining whether a general redress scheme should be established for victims across the country.

It would seem there is now momentum at the very least for an alternative process to both the Courts and *Towards Healing* for victims to seek compensation.

From our perspective, this national scheme would seem to be in the long-term interest of victims, many of whom have faced serious obstacles in having to litigate their claims in court.

The legal process should always be available for victims but a national victims' compensation scheme, supplemented by a separate process of pastoral support has the potential to offer better outcomes.

I understand some people may be reluctant to trust the Church whenever we make any proposals or suggestions about how things could change to improve our response to victims.

The Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry Report documented the terrible abuse that occurred in the Catholic Church in Victoria between 1960 and 1985.

In response to the report, Archbishop Denis Hart spoke of his sorrow, but also of his determination to help victims and his will to cooperate fully with the Inquiry.

"It is the worst betrayal of trust in my lifetime in the Catholic Church...It is our hope that the Inquiry, and its recommendations will assist the healing of those who have been abused. We also hope they will enhance the care of victims and their families, and strengthen the preventative measures now in place." Archbishop Denis Hart.

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The Catholic Church will quite rightly be under intense scrutiny by the Royal Commission when the *Towards Healing* hearings start on December 9.

The Church must listen and hear, and importantly we must act. We must build bridges and look for positive solutions to lighten the load for victims.

A national compensation scheme will be the start of what we hope will be a healing journey for victims of sexual abuse.

Francis Sullivan

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www.tjhcouncil.org.au